

What Is A Toll-Free Number And How Does It Work?

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

Toll-free numbers are numbers that begin with one of the following three-digit codes: 800, 888, 877, or 866. Toll-free numbers allow callers to reach businesses and/or individuals without being charged for the call. The charge for using a toll-free number is paid by the called party (the toll-free subscriber) instead of the calling party. Toll-free numbers can be dialed directly to your business or personal telephone line.

Toll-free numbers are very common today. Toll-free service has proven successful for businesses, particularly in the areas of customer service and telemarketing. Toll-free service provides potential customers and others with a “free” and convenient way to contact businesses.

Toll-free numbers are also increasingly popular for personal use. For example, parents can give their toll-free numbers to a child who is away at college, allowing that child to call home anytime without having to make a collect call and without the child having to pay for the call.

Toll-Free Codes – 800, 888, 877, 866, ...

Today, there are four toll-free codes: 800, 888, 877, and 866. Although 800, 888, 877, and 866 are all toll-free codes, they are not interchangeable. 1-800-234-5678 is not the same as 1-888-234-5678. Calls to each toll-free number are routed to a particular local phone number.

Toll-Free Directory Assistance

Toll-free directory assistance for some toll-free numbers can be obtained by calling 1-800-555-1212. The service is free. Not all toll-free numbers are listed – only those for subscribers that choose to list them. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) plans to address how to promote competition among multiple providers of directory assistance. In the meantime, 1-888-555-XXXX numbers are not being assigned to subscribers.

How Are Toll-Free Numbers Assigned?

Toll-free numbers are assigned on a first-come, first-served basis. Toll-free service providers (sometimes referred to as “Responsible Organizations” or “RespOrgs”) have access to the SMS/800 database, which contains information regarding the status of all toll-free numbers. RespOrgs are certified by the SMS/800 database administrator, which manages toll-free service.

Contact a toll-free service provider if you want to obtain a toll-free number. Toll-free service providers can access the database and reserve a number for subscribers. There are several hundred toll-free service providers in the United States. You may find a list of all toll-free service providers on the SMS/800’s Web site, www.sms800.com/ or you may call the SMS/800 Help Desk at 1-888-SMS-3300.

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What Is the FCC's Role?

The FCC regulates or sets the rules under which toll-free numbers can be used or obtained. The FCC has ordered that toll-free numbers must be portable. The FCC's rules designate the criteria for determining the status of each toll-free number, and prohibits "warehousing" and "hoarding" of toll-free numbers.

The FCC is not involved in the day-to-day assignment of toll-free numbers, does not have direct access to the toll-free database, and cannot provide any information about the status of a toll-free number or about a request for a toll-free number. A telephone industry standards-setting organization establishes guidelines for toll-free numbers and the guidelines must comply with the FCC's requirements.

Toll-Free Number Portability

In the past, if a subscriber wanted to change long distance carriers, the subscriber would have to change toll-free numbers, since toll-free numbers were not "portable" from one carrier to another. To make the toll-free market more competitive, the FCC established a policy that made toll-free numbers "portable." This means that now a toll-free subscriber can change his or her toll-free service to another carrier but still keep the same toll-free number.

What Is A "Vanity" Number and How Can I Get One?

A "vanity" number is a toll-free telephone number that also spells a person's or company's name or spells a word or acronym that is chosen by the subscriber, such as 1-800-FLOWERS or 1-888-NEW-CARS. To find out whether a specific toll-free number is available, contact any toll-free service provider.

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"Warehousing/Hoarding" Toll-Free Numbers

"Warehousing" by toll-free service providers is prohibited by the FCC's rules. A toll-free service provider may not legally reserve a toll-free number without having an actual toll-free subscriber for whom the number is being reserved. Toll-free service providers who warehouse numbers are subject to penalties.

"Hoarding" by subscribers is similarly prohibited and illegal. A subscriber may not acquire more toll-free numbers than the subscriber intends to use. Hoarding also includes "number brokering;" it is illegal for a subscriber to sell a toll-free number for a fee.

What If I Have A Problem or a Complaint?

If you have a problem or a complaint about a company providing toll-free numbers or services, you should first try to resolve your complaint with that company or the company that bills you for the service.

If you are not successful in resolving the problem, you may file a complaint with the FCC by e-mail – fccinfo@fcc.gov, the Internet www.fcc.gov/cgb/complaints.html), by telephone 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice, 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY, or by mail.

If you are mailing in a complaint, send the complaint to:

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

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Your complaint letter should include:

- name, address and telephone number where you can be reached during the business day;
- telephone number involved with the complaint;
- as much specific information about the complaint as possible;
- a description of the steps you took to resolve the complaint;
- names and telephone numbers of the company employees that you talked to in an effort to resolve the complaint, and the dates that you talked to these employees;
- copies of bills listing the disputed charges (circle the disputed charges on the copies of the bills); and
- relief that you are requesting (such as an adjustment of charges).

For Additional Information

For additional information about toll-free numbers or other telecommunications-related subjects, please visit the FCC's Web site at www.fcc.gov/cgb.

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To receive information on this and other FCC consumer topics through the Commission's electronic subscriber service, click on <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/contacts/>.

This document is for consumer education purposes only and is not intended to affect any proceeding or cases involving this subject matter or related issues.

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Federal Communications Commission ■ Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau ■ 445 12th St., SW ■ Washington, DC 20554
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